

September 2004

Op Ed -- Little Red Herrings: Filter-tipped Libraries

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Recommended Citation

Herring, Mark Y. (2004) "Op Ed -- Little Red Herrings: Filter-tipped Libraries," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 12.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4393>

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Op Ed — Little Red Herrings: Filter-tipped Libraries

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Is it possible to say something positive about Internet filtering in libraries and not have everyone, including your mother, call you a wild-eyed, hidebound, neo-Nazi bashi-bazouk? No, of course not, but I'm going to try to anyway.

Our story begins in the late 1930s, when the **American Library Association**, working hand-in-glove with the **American Civil Liberties Union**, issued its **Library Bill of Rights**. In a word, the document said everyone had the right to read and no one, of course, disagreed with this. The innocuous document served well enough over the coming years because everyone remained agreeable and sensible about what reading is, and what constituted this right. But nestled in its midst, the document also heralded ALA's embrace of an absolutist view of the First Amendment, one shared by the **ACLU** and many others. The right to read came to mean, in absolutist terms, we must select everything for fear of censoring anything. No one really did this but the ideal could not be easily gainsaid, except at the operational level, a minor, devilish detail.

Unfortunately, bad enough is seldom left alone. Later, during the turbulent sixties and early seventies, **ALA** issued its *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (hereinafter *IFM*). By now nearly everyone was activist-minded and *IFM* (and **ALA**) proved no exception. The *IFM* spelled out this right to read by adding prohibitions to prohibitions: librarians should not sequester what they considered to be adult materials because this flew in the face of the absolutist view. Further, there were to be no adult shelves so labeled because this, too, smacked of even the faintest hint of restriction.

All of this came under the guise of preventing our libraries from becoming bare, ruin'd choirs but there was more madness than method. Children, under this absolutist view, had as much right to the *Joy of Sex* as anyone; and librarians were not to act in *loco parentis*. Fast-forward to 2004 and it comes as no surprise that **ALA** has joined forces with the **ACLU** once more to issue a clarion call against Internet filtering and the protection of pornography in the nations libraries.

What is curious about all this, however, is **ALA's** duplicity. **ALA** spokespersons dismiss, dismissively, the argument that young people would ever surf for porn. In an astounding admission of self-delusion, **Leonard Kniffel**, editor of **ALA's** official publication for librarians, *American Libraries*, wrote, "Kids don't have time to sit at library computers and

troll for smut, nor do they wish to." (And the former President did not have sexual relations with that woman, **Monica Lewinsky**, either.)

Further duplicity abounds. Librarians censor daily, or rather restrict in such a way that the end result is as if censoring had taken place: this book is too expensive; that database is too narrow; this CD-ROM is too general. Moreover, while filtering merely removed the chance that **John Doe** can surf for porn at the library's expense (he can still go home and surf until his heart's content, or until his wife gongs him with an iron skillet, whichever comes first). On the other hand, when library A chooses not to buy database B (probably owing to expense) it's that unlikely that any individual can or will.

If truth be told, we even do a bit of the ideological censoring. For example, you'll not find many treatises by the **John Birch Society** in our nation's libraries; nor will you find much of the **KKK's** hate-mongering. Neither will you find much, if any, in the way of anti-gay or anti-lesbian materials. When we librarians remove or omit materials, we call it selection. When the little, blue-haired old lady, toting a purse the size of a railcar wants to take from the library **Madonna's** book titled *Sex*, we excoriate it as censorship.

It's not that the material substance of the absolutist views of the First Amendment arguments is disagreeable; it's the casuistry behind it that wrecks from effluvia. What distinguishes us from animals is our ability to make fine distinctions. We do not, for example, call a

monkey with a paintbrush, **Picasso**; his work may *look* like modern art, but we think we see a difference. Most people understand that while you may go native in your living room, you cannot do that at the local Wal-Mart. Or rather, you may, but only until the police arrive.

What puzzles me is that we cannot seem to make these same distinctions when it comes to pornography in the library. If one bare-bottomed shot is filtered, so goes the **ALA** argument, well, then there goes the intellectual neighborhood. In essence, librarians have been reduced to saying all words or pictures on a page or monitor are the same. All are potential information. The argument is akin to saying we should never arrest anyone for fear of arresting an innocent person. Yet, we know that words hurt, that ideas have consequences; and we know that pornographic materials, whether soft-

or hard-core, whether glossy or full color, high or low resolution, are bad for people. Report

after report teaches us that **Tom Schiro**, **Ted Bundy** and thousands of others have confirmed it: and, the nearly three in five men addicted to some form of it underscores how late the hour is. We know that vice, seen too often, familiar with its face, is something we first endure, then fondle, then embrace. This may not seem very open-minded to some people, but then, as **Flannery O'Connor** pointed out, some people are so open-minded their brains have fallen out. 🍌

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